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Argyris and Habermas:  
Two Alternatives to Strategic Interpersonal Behavior

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In this paper I want to compare two theories of intersubjective competence. The theories in question are the interpersonal competence theory of Argyris (Argyris and Schön, 1974) and the communicative competence theory of Habermas (1979). Three questions are relevant: What features do the theories share? How are these features linked? And are the features and the way they are linked generalizable properties of theories of competence as a way of approaching social action?

First, a brief description of Argyris's theory is in order. The theory contains two explanatory models, Model I and Model II, and a third model which describes the transition procedures actors follow as their behavior changes from Model I to Model II. Model I is a model of incompetent interpersonal behavior, and Model II a model of competent behavior. Argyris states that Model II is not the opposite of Model I; consequently, a scale of competence could not be constructed on Model I and its negation.

Underlying the models is a theory of behavior based on the concept of governing variables. Argyris asserts that humans test personal theories in their actions in order to get what they want and thus agrees with Kelley's (1955) theory that humans act as "applied scientists." Governing variables are variables in personal theories of action. The governing variables of Model I are: 1. define goals and try to achieve them; 2. minimize generating or expressing negative feelings; 3. be rational; 4. win, don't lose. Those of Model II are: 1. valid information; 2. free and informed; 3. internal commitment.

Both Model I and Model II have action strategies associated with their governing variables. The strategies of Model I are: 1. design and manage the environment unilaterally; 2. own and control the task; 3. unilaterally protect others from being hurt; 4. unilaterally protect oneself. The action strategies of Model II are: 1. design situations or environments where



participants can be origins and can exercise high personal causation;  
2. task is controlled jointly; 3. protection of self is a joint enterprise  
and oriented towards growth; 4. bilateral protection of others.

Argyris makes the distinction between espoused theories and theories in use. This distinction is based on the frequent incompatibilities between the values an actor espouses and the values he appears to act on when his actions are interpreted by an observer. As value systems, Model I and Model II are both espoused by actors and observable in their actions. It is, however, more likely that in general, actors will espouse Model II values but be observed to act according to Model I.

The transition from Model I to Model II occurs for actors when they are members of a group and is based on 1) the raising of dilemmas, 2) personally caused experience, 3) individuality and conflict, and 4) the competence of the group leader. Dilemmas occur when a) espoused theory is shown to be incongruent with theory in use, b) when theory in use governing variables are inconsistent, c) when the theory in use loses effectiveness, d) when the behavioral world created in part by the theory in use becomes intolerable, and/or e) when an actor can no longer test his assumptions. Personally caused experience is based on a three part process: a) predicting the consequences of a particular behavior; b) examining the governing variables of the behavior; and c) identifying the feedback from the environment that induces resistance to change. Actors in the group learn to value individuality and the surfacing of conflict as norms become accepted which are consistent with a hypothetical behavioral world guided by Model II governing variables. Finally, the instructor's competence arises from his faith in his students, his recognition of their present limitations, his ability to integrate feelings and ideas, and his ability to encourage spontaneity.



Likewise a description of Habermas' theory of communicative action is called for. Habermas, like Argyris, partitions social action into two classes; in his theory the classes are called strategic and communicative action (see Figure 1). Strategic actors are oriented towards success and cognition, while communicative actors are oriented towards consensus and performative acts which include an orientation towards cognition. Validity claims are made by actors in their speech acts and are each connected with a realm of reality; the pattern of parallels between a speaker's orientation, realms of reality, claims to validity, and the mode of appearance of speech acts is found in Figure 2. Strategic actors make a claim to validity regarding truth and are concerned with the outer realm of reality; communicative actors make the claim to truth and in addition claims to veracity and correctness which correspond to the inner and normative realms.

Habermas uses the concept of rule to link speech acts with actions in general. There are three types of rules: operational rules (corresponding to Piaget's (1952) schemes), rules of practice, and rules of action. Operational rules apply to such structures as grammars, logic, algebra, and musical notation. Operational rules constitute but do not cause behavior and are performed unconsciously except in some practices where they are consciously applied. Rules of practice are followed in game playing, for example in chess or football. Games are neither actions nor operations but have features of both; they are the skillful use of operations in social activity for a strategic purpose. Rules of action are followed in instrumental, strategic, and social action.

Norms are complex rules which presuppose a context and can be the reasons which motivate actions. Strategic norms are reducible to the intentions of the actor, whereas social norms are not. In following a social norm an actor fulfills a social expectation shared by the actor's community; the



actor reaches a common understanding with another actor if and only if both mutually recognize validity claims with regard to a normative context. Norms of strategic actions are strategies which will be efficient to the degree that their propositions are empirically true and interconnected. In strategic actions an actor may be informed about another's base of choices without the necessity that the information be shared. The orientation towards success in strategic action presupposes an objectivating attitude which does not require, in fact does not allow, an actor to take a relationship of understanding. Instrumental norms are simply those which guide non-social acts of production.

Habermas argues that empiricist models of behavior such as games models and normative schemes such as Parsons' action frame of reference are incomplete. Models of intentionality which focus on the actions of individual actors and models of normatively guided action in which norms replace intentions as the force binding action are extreme cases of the model of communicative action. In communicative action, actors are oriented towards all three worlds: objective, subjective, and normative.

A main obstacle to comparing the theories Argyris and Habermas is the temptation to refer them to a higher order. Such a process is dangerous because it masks fundamental differences between the theories in deference to their similarities. The differences define the outer boundaries of the theories in the process of comparison, while the similarities describe the overlaps. A concept in one theory may overlap with a transformation of that concept in the other theory, and it is the absence of overlaps of either transformed concepts which identifies where the theories diverge. The divergent concepts may, however, be connected through other concepts. The basis of comparison when the boundaries are not tied to the overlaps will be the degree of structural similarity.





The strongest overlap is the similarity of the two classes of behavior in the two theories. While the forms of the classification schemes in each theory are quite different, the major classes of Argyris's theory are conceptually parallel to the classes in Habermas's. Model I is similar to strategic behavior; Model II to communicative behavior. This overlap occurs in several ways. First, the attributes of strategic actions are comparable to Model I governing variables. Strategic actions require an orientation towards success in a social context and do not allow a relationship of understanding. Strategic actors are oriented towards cognition and not towards self-expression or normative definitions or contexts; such actors are thus concerned only with claims to validity regarding truth and are necessarily not concerned with claims to veracity and correctness. A strategic actor communicates with those he involves in his purpose in such a way as to orient their choices towards his goal. Thus strategic action is related to the governing variables of Model I in that: 1) the success orientation in strategic action corresponds to the definition of and attempt to achieve goals and win/lose dynamics; and 2) the strategic actor's focus on cognition is comparable to the Model I variable, "be rational,"

The fourth governing variable, of Model I, the minimization of negative feelings, does not have a direct correlate in Habermas's set of attributes of strategic behavior. An argument can be made, however, which links this governing variable with inferences made from the attributes of communicative action. To the extent that claims to veracity and correctness are being fulfilled in communicative action, negative feelings will be expressed when they are relevant to and sanctioned by the social context. The repression of negative feelings would indicate the absence of communicative action. Given the exhaustiveness of Habermas's categorial framework, such a denial will occur when actions are strategic and is thus a property of both strategic and Model I actions (see Figure 3).



For Habermas interactive competence is approached through an orientation towards consensus, but in Argyris's theory no such mediating orientation exists. Actions based on Model II governing variables are competent to the extent that these variables are regulative of and in a sense operationalized in the actions. Model II governing variables correspond conceptually to claims to validity (see Figure 4), but their function is different. The claim to truth may be seen to be related to the governing variable, "valid information"; and the claim to veracity to "internal commitment." However, the claim to correctness does not correspond to the variable, "free and informed choice." This divergence parallels the lack of fit between the approaches to competence in the theories. Communicative actors achieve competence through an orientation towards consensus and by fulfilling validity claims, one of which, the claim to correctness, is a transformation of the orientation towards consensus. This transformation functions as a means of managing conflict. Conflicts can be resolved when actors remain oriented towards the fulfillment of all validity claims in the face of failures to conform to the normative context. Discussions concerning these failures are necessary for claim fulfillment. Since there is no comparable orientation for Model II actors, there is no governing variable corresponding to the claim to correctness. Actors are self-assertive and seek information in such a way as to remain within the acceptable ranges of the other Model II governing variables. Such actions may induce discussion about normative failures, but this is not necessary. In neither theory is there certainty that conflict resolution will occur; the rules for resolution are, however, theoretically clear for communicative actors, but not clear for subscribers to Model II.

The theories also contain concepts which are associated with but lie outside the classes of behavior whose similarities were discussed above. In Habermas's theory these are the spectrum of rules to which actions can be



referred, and in Argyris's theory these external concepts are the action strategies through which governing variables become behavior. While there is one spectrum of rules, there are two sets of action strategies, one for each model. The relationship between the rule spectrum and social action appears to be that of structural elucidation mediated by norms of action in that actions can be explained by norms of the social context, and norms are complex rules. Action strategies on the other hand are explained by the governing variables of the models: and in addition, the strategies produce behavioral consequences. Behavioral consequences are the effects of actions based on the strategies which follow the governing variables. In order to compare the explanatory structures of Argyris's and Habermas's theories, it is necessary to judge the similarity of their structures (see Figure 5).

Norms of action are central in Habermas's theory in that they are composed of rules and explain actions; in Argyris's theory action strategies are central in that they are explained by governing variables and produce behavioral consequences. Yet the theory of communicative action is not a theory of normatively guided action, nor in Argyris's theory is the achievement of competence dependent upon the concept of action strategies alone. Matters are made more complex in Habermas's theory by the addition of the subjective and objective worlds, which are required for the explanation of social action and in Argyris's theory by the two models of behavior, Model I and Model II, each of which contains a distinct set of action strategies and behavioral consequences. Moreover, a further constraint is placed on the explanatory power of norms. Since strategic norms are not independent of intentions, norms are sufficient explanators of action only when actors are oriented towards consensus, that is, only in communicative action. In contrast, the action strategies of both Models I and II are explained by their governing variables. Governing variables may act as either norms or individual values



as long as the same explanatory structure is used for both models. But in Model I, one is tempted to interpret the governing variables as strategic (perhaps meta-strategic) norms which are reducible to actors' intentions, whereas in Model II the governing variables are associated with validity claims.

The contexts in which Model II governing variables are espoused are constructed by actors who are oriented towards competence without an orientation towards consensus. Social norms partially explain communicative action, and governing variables explain the action strategies in Model II environments (see Figure 6). Model II governing variables relate only to the validity claims to truth and veracity and not to the claim to normative validity; thus validity claims, when looked at as governing variables, achieve the status of explanans shared with social norms. What the difference in orientation towards consenses between Habermas and Argyris means in a theoretical sense begins to be clear. Argyris makes the complex status of governing variables (norms, values, claims) possible by excluding generalized social norms and thus any claim to normative validity. Actors value intentional adherence to claims in a Model II setting as they encourage each other to act competently. In a sense the claims to truth and veracity have been reified at the subjective and normative levels. By its transformation into the claim to normative validity the orientation towards consensus in Habermas's theory is related to the explanatory power of social norms in the same way as the absence of such an orientation heightens the power of claims to truth and veracity in Model II contexts. For Habermas the role of consensus as the focus of actors' orientations is associated with an explanatory structure in which communicative acts are linked by norms. These norms are at once guidelines for the actor and compositions of generalized rules of action.

The fit of Habermas's worlds of action (objective, subjective, normative) to the governing variables of Model II through the mediation of claims to validity indicates that the governing variable which parallels





the normative world is "free and informed choice." The complex status of the governing variables, weighted toward the subjective world (see Figure 7), is consistent with what "free and informed choice" connotes. "Free and informed choice" could be described as a rule for the meeting of self-conscious subjectivities rather than as a rule for intersubjective behavior. Habermas then may be regarded as being concerned first with rules of intersubjective behavior which may be recognized and discussed self-consciously by actors. Argyris goes further and advocates one such rule in an applied form -- free and informed choice; this governing variable applies in those specific social contexts in which actors are self-consciously attempting to follow the precepts of Model II. Thus the orientation towards consensus and the claim to normative validity which the theory of communicative competence posits in generalized social contexts are replaced by the governing variable, "free and informed choice," in specific Model II social contexts. The well-governed normative aspect of intersubjective experience in Habermas's theory is consequently paralleled by the intersubjective experience of subjective values in Argyris's theory, and this parallel is reflected in the comparison of the explanatory structures.

Argyris's theory of interpersonal competence is thus embedded in Habermas's theory of communicative action. Models I and II are related to concepts such as validity claims and to the communicative/strategic taxonomic structures. The governing variables of Argyris's Model II are parallel to the universal claims to validity of the theory of communicative action, and those of Model I to characteristics of strategic action. Argyris's theory, however, is also elevated above the communicative action arguments since it has replaced an appeal to generalized norms by a specific rule of action. Model II governing variables serve as both values and norms in a system in which Habermas's concept of normativity is missing and the variable, "free and informed choice," included in its stead.



Argyris's theory is a step closer to application in that it specifies a rule for competent action in particular contexts. The subjective emphasis of Model II contrasts with the intersubjective emphasis of the theory of communicative action, but neither is to be confused with arguments of intentionally or normatively guided action. Rather it is possible to look at Model II as a transformed, applied version of communicative action, which is reduced and reshaped to fit specified social contexts (training groups, executive seminars, top management groups). In these contexts, it is hypothesized, the discussion of generalized norms cannot be approached except through the espousal of free choice and reified claims to truth and veracity.

Two parting questions, which are related, seem relevant. First, will theories of competence develop as outgrowths of a general theory in response to problems in specific social settings or as independent but comparable theories, as in the case of Argyris and Habermas? Second, will the answer to this question be determined by the characteristics of the specific social settings in which theorists interested in competence practice? Answers to these questions should be forthcoming as competence theorists build models of theory application and attempt to reconcile the inconsistencies between theory and practice generated by observation of how those models are enacted.



Figure 1

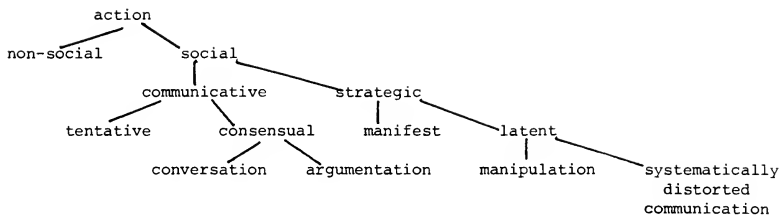


Figure 2

<u>speaker's orient.</u>	<u>realm of reality</u>	<u>mode of appearance</u>	<u>claim to validity</u>
cognitive	outer	objectivity	truth
self-expressive	inner	subjectivity	veracity
conformative	normative	normativity	correctness

Figure 3

<u>strategic action</u>	<u>Model I</u>
orientation towards success	→ set goals, win/lose dynamics
cognitive emphasis	↔ be rational
lack of argumentation	↔ minimization of negative feelings

Figure 4

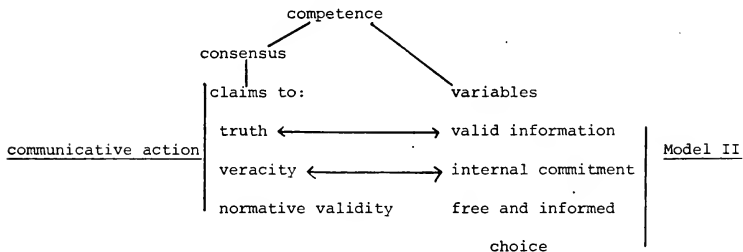




Figure 5

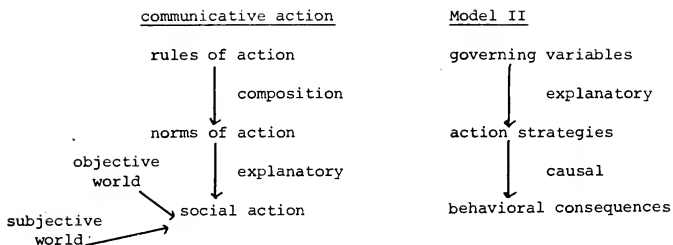


Figure 6

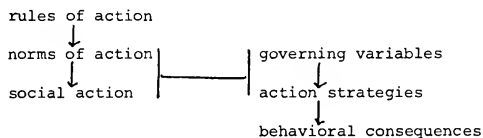


Figure 7

<u>world</u>	<u>claims</u>	<u>location of explanatory emphasis</u>
objective	truth	-
subjective	veracity	values
normative	-	norms





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